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Arms as Aid: Rising Doubt

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WASHINGTON, May 8 — The overwhelming Congressional votes this week against President Reagan's proposed arms deal with Saudi Arabia reflect rising doubts among legislators about the Administration's plans to use

American-supplied weapons as a primary instrument of foreign policy.

News

Analysis

To Congressional supporters of the Administration, this is a deeply disturbing trend that could undermine President Reagan's ability to conduct foreign affairs from the Middle East to Central America.

"Micromanagement of foreign policy has reached a nadir in this Congress," said Representative Henry J. Hyde of Illinois, a senior Republican on the Foreign Affairs Committee. "And it makes it very difficult in a dangerous world where there is increasingly less margin for error."

But Congressional critics of the Administration say they are simply carrying out their constitutional responsibilities to control the Federal purse and influence Administration policies. Representative Dave McCurdy, an Oklahoma Democrat on the House Select Committee on Intelligence, expressed a view of the Administration's policy that is common among the critics: "You don't buy allies."

Consultation Sought

Moreover, even supporters of Mr. Reagan say the Administration has caused many of its own problems by failing to adequately consult Congress on foreign policy matters. Mark Helmke, a spokesman for Senator Richard G. Lugar, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, said: "Lugar keeps stressing that there has to be a partnership on foreign policy. As soon as the Administration goes it alone, they are much more likely to lose."

As Mr. Helmke noted, the Administration had a foreign policy triumph in the Philippines, where it helped to replace Ferdinand E. Marcos as President with Corazon C. Aquino. But the Administration moved to support Mrs. Aquino only after the White House listened to advice from many lawmakers that he drop Mr. Marcos.

In the Saudi case, the Administration continues to defy large majorities in both chambers who voted to block Mr. Reagan's plan to sell advanced missiles worth \$354 million to Riyadh. Mr. Reagan vowed to veto the resolution of disapproval and Donald T. Regan, the White House chief of staff, predicted today that the veto would be sustained, at least in the Senate.

A 'Continuous Struggle'

But the President faces a very difficult task. In both chambers, the margin against his plan was far more than the two-thirds vote needed to override his veto.

Representative Dick Cheney of Wyoming, a member of the Republican leadership, observed that Congress and the White House have been engaged in a "continuous struggle" over foreign policy matters since the end of the Vietnam War. That struggle has heated up in recent months.

Congress has twice thwarted President Reagan's plan to send \$100 million in military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, and a bill heading for the House floor would effectively bar secret aid to insurgents in Angola.

Today, a House subcommittee voted to subpoena the bank records of brokers and suppliers who handled \$27 million in nonmilitary aid for the Nicaraguan rebels last year. The House intelligence committee voted to continue to bar the Central Intelligence Agency from an operational role in the Nicaraguan battle. And four Senate Democrats urged President Reagan to more closely consult with Congress under the War Powers Resolution in light of the recent attack on Libyan targets.

An Element of Policy

To the Administration and its supporters, the use of military aid and arms deals constitutes an essential element of foreign policy. This week, they have argued that the main reason for completing the Saudi sale was political rather than military, that selling arms was a sign of friendship and a way of cementing relationships with moderate Governments in the Middle East.

Moreover, Mr. Cheney said, selling arms to a country creates a "continuing relationship" that involves training troops, replenishing stockpiles, and supplying spare parts. According to this reasoning, Washington has extra leverage over any country that is dependent on American weapons.

But that argument failed partly because many members of Congress did not accept the Administration's contention that American arms had made Saudi Arabia a useful and reliable ally. Many said the Saudis had undermined the Middle East peace process by denouncing Egypt and financing the Palestine Liberation Organization.

President Reagan eroded his own case by calling attention to the issue of terrorism and by ordering American planes to attack Libya. The resulting mood, particularly in light of the Saudis' support for Libya, worked strongly against the President on the question of aid to Riyadh.

A third factor, in Mr. Cheney's view, was "crass, crude politics." Even though Israel and the lobbying groups that support its policies stayed out of the fight over arms for the Saudis, many lawmakers said they still did not want to risk the wrath of Israel's supporters in the next election.

Supporters of the President also say that the Administration, distracted by the Tokyo summit meeting, did a particularly poor job of promoting the arms deal. The result, Representative Hyde said, is that the Administration is now lamed by a wound it helped inflict on itself.